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Singing the quatrains
Omar Khayyām and Umm Kulthūm

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In the 1950’s and 1960’s Omar Khayyām enjoyed an enormous popularity in Egypt. This had, of course, to do with the intrinsic and perennial qualities of the quatrains but even more so with the fact that they were performed by the woman who till today is considered Kawkab al-Sharq, the ‘Star of the Orient’, that greatest of Arab singers, Umm Kulthūm (1898-1975). She did not sing the quatrains in Persian, but in the Arabic translation of her long-time admirer, friend and songwriter, Aḥmad Rāmī (1892-1981), the Shāʿīr al-Shabāb, ‘the poet of the Youth’ as he was called, after the name of the journal in which he first published.

As a part of the large repertoire that Aḥmad Rāmī especially wrote for Umm Kulthūm, she also sung selections of Aḥmad Rāmī’s translation of Omar Khayyām’s quatrains. Umm Kulthūm’s performance has brought the quatrains to the attention of an audience of many millions in Egypt and, propelled by the singer’s fame, also in the rest of the Arab world. Omar Khayyām’s popularity had in fact not only spread to the Western World after he had been discovered by Edward FitzGerald in 1859 – or rather after FitzGerald’s translation had in itself become a discovery. In Iran Khayyām the poet became as popular as Ḥāfiẓ (d. 1320) and Saʿdī (d. 1292) had been there all the time, but only after he had become famous in England and the US. Before his Western discovery Khayyām was just one of many interesting Persian poets, as is evident from his relatively modest entry in the Ātashkada, the poetical anthology by Luṭfʿ Alī Beg Ādhar Begdīlī (d. 1780) which precedes the Omar hype by about a century. Modern works by Khayyām-enthusiasts (such as Mehdi Aminrazavi’s recent book) have a tendency to project Khayyām’s present popularity back into history, but this is entirely anachronistic. The Arab Middle East saw the publication of a considerable number of different translations of the quatrains of Khayyām once he had been recognized in the West as a great poet.

One of these Arabic translations was made in the late 1920’s by the Egyptian poet Aḥmad Muḥammad Rāmī. Aḥmad Rāmī’s translation seems first to have become public in 1924, but in its final shape it was published in 1931. This translation became popular and has remained in
print ever since. Aḥmad Rāmī came from a literary and musical family. His brother Maḥmūd was a composer, but he died in 1923, too early to make a lasting name in Arab music for himself. Aḥmad Rāmī was active in many fields of literature and the performing arts. In his younger years he had travelled in Europe, among other things in search of manuscripts of Khayyām’s quatrains in Europe’s oriental collections, as he tells his reader in the preface to his translation. His translation is said to be based on his research on the most important Persian manuscripts of the quatrains, kept in Oxford, Paris, Berlin, London, Cambridge and also in Patna in India, and on a number of translations into European languages. From Aḥmad Rāmī’s translation itself it is not clear what exactly has been the consequence of all this research, but the introduction to the translation gives the book a nice cosmopolitan flair, behind which its textual sources remain hidden.

Apart from his work on Khayyām’s quatrains Aḥmad Rāmī has also translated plays by Shakespeare into Arabic, yet his lasting fame rests on the numerous lyrics he wrote for both Umm Kulthūm and Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Walḥāb (1899 or 1907-1991), two great names in Egypt’s musical history. The relationship between Aḥmad Rāmī and Umm Kulthūm was one of long standing. From 1924 onwards Rāmī started visiting Umm Kulthūm and read poetry with her. Aḥmad’s brother Maḥmūd was hired to teach her the lute. Soon after, in 1926, Aḥmad Rāmī started writing lyrics for Umm Kulthūm’s repertoire. In the late 1920’s and the 1930’s the composer Muḥammad al-Qaṣąbǧī and Aḥmad Rāmī completely dominated Umm Kulthum’s repertoire. Aḥmad Rāmī provided the romantic texts. When in 1935 Umm Kulthūm’s first film Widād (‘Love’) came out, the script and song texts were by Aḥmad Rāmī.

The exact nature of the relationship between Umm Kulthūm and Aḥmad Rāmī has been the object of speculation. In his biographical compilation on Umm Kulthūm, the Egyptian radio and TV journalist Sa’d Sāmī Ramaḍān tells how Aḥmad Rāmī, in 1954 during a conference in Beirut, was completely surprised by the news that Umm Kulthūm had just married (in fact her family doctor, Ḥasan al-Ḥīfnāwī). Aḥmad Rāmī immediately left the conference, withdrew to his hotel room and wrote the ode Dhikrayāt, ‘Memories’, also titled Qiṣṣāt Ḥubbī, ‘My love story’. Later on, the ode was, of course, incorporated in Umm Kulthūm’s repertoire (songbook, p. 199 = Diwān Rāmī, pp. 197-198). That caused an interesting lover’s paradox. That Aḥmad Rāmī was infatuated with love of the ‘Star of the Orient’ is evident. His ode Dhikrayāt, and some others as well, such as Ḥayyarti Qalbī ma’āk, ‘You have brought my heart in utter confusion’ (songbook, p. 194, in which Umm Kulthūm probably sang Ḥayyarta = Diwān Rāmī, pp. 281-282), would, because of Aḥmad Rāmī’s popularity as a poet at the time, have been read and heard by a hundred thousand of people anyway, but only when Umm Kulthūm would sing this ode it
would be heard by at least a hundred million in the entire Arab fatherland. The rejected lover could only let his complaint be widely heard if Umm Kulthûm, the object of his unrequited love, would make it popular. For whatever it is true, the anecdote, which is said to have been recorded from the mouth of Ahmad Râmî himself, nicely shows the intimate symbiosis between the singer and her poet.

When one reads Ahmad Râmî’s poetry from this angle one gets the impression that many poems in the Dîwân could actually have been written for Umm Kulthûm or were at least inspired by her. Would she have been the one he waited for at night, while listening at the radio? (Dîwân Râmî, p. 81):

‘How many nights I have spent awake
All alone, while people around me were sleeping?
I ask the wind about a companion that whispers
To me, and sleep flies away from my eyelids.’

‘My love story’, written when he heard that Umm Kulthûm had married, begins (Dîwân Râmî, p. 197):

‘Memories that transgress the horizon of my imagination
A lightning that shines in the dark of the night.
She woke up my heart from its slumber,
And illuminated me behind the curtain of the empty days.
How can I forget her, as long as my heart beats in my breast?
She is the story of my love.’

On July 7, 1975, a few months after the singer’s demise, Ahmad Râmî wrote an elegy for her, which begins as follows (Dîwân Râmî, p. 191):

‘I would never have thought that I would write an elegy for her,
After all those emotional songs that I have created for her.
I have heard her singing and she enraptured me.
Today I hear myself: I cry, and I mourn for her.
I loved her from the morning of my life and I lived for her.’

But Ahmad Râmî was more than just a sentimentalist. Directly after Egypt’s revolution of 1952 a new national anthem was written by Ahmad Râmî with music by Riyâd al-Sunbâṭî (1906-1981). It shows that this duo was at the height of their popularity. But Egypt has had quite a number of national anthems in a relatively short period. In 1970 the poem Nashîd al-Silâh, the ‘Song of Arms’, by Shâlîh Gâhîn (1930-1986) became Egypt’s national anthem, after it had first been made popular and famous in 1956 during the Suez crisis by a rendering by Umm Kulthûm
(songbook, p. 312) on a musical score by Kamāl al-Ţawīl (1922-2003), the same composer who also wrote the scores for the national anthems of several other Arab countries. In 1979 the text of Egypt’s national anthem was changed into the well-known Bilādī, bilādī, bilādī-song by Muḥammad Yūnus al-Qāḍī, who wrote the text as early as 1878, and for the melody of which use was made of the musical score originally composed by Sayyid Darwīsh (1892-1923), another great name.

This short digression on modern Egypt’s musical and literary history may serve to show that Khayyām’s quatrains were brought to an immense public by the country’s artistic élite and top-performers of the period. In 1949 Āḥmad Rāmī’s translation of the quatrains had come on Umm Kulthūm’s repertoire and Riyāḍ al-Sunbāṭī (d. 1981), who was the singer’s principal lute-player and composer at the time, had made the musical score. He has been Umm Kulthūm’s preferred composer for many years, and he was the necessary third person in the relationship. The trio, Āḥmad Rāmī, Riyāḍ al-Sunbāṭī and Umm Kulthūm contributed each according to their talents and capacities: words, melody, performance. The fourth factor was, of course, Umm Kulthūm’s music ensemble, and Queen Umm Kulthūm lead them all. Āḥmad Rāmī kept writing lyrics for Umm Kulthūm till well in the 1970’s and the relationship between him and the singer remained one of loyalty and trust, though not one of exclusivity, as Umm Kulthūm was constantly diversifying her dependence on songwriters and composers. Her songbook mentions thirteen different composers (including herself), and more than fifty poets whose works she sang. Of the latter group Āḥmad Rāmī has contributed by far the most to her repertoire.

In order to get a better idea of how Āḥmad Rāmī worked let us have a look at the famous opening quatrain by Khayyām and how this fared in Rāmī’s hands (Persian text taken from Nicolas, No. 1):

\[
\text{ﻪﻧﺍﻮﻳﺩﻰﺗﺎﺑﺍﺮﺧﺪﻧﺭﻰﻛ} \\
\text{ء} \\
\text{ﻪﻧﺎﺨﻴﻣﺯﺍﺪﻧﻯﺮﺤﺳﺪﻣﺁﺎﻣ} \\
\text{ء} \\
\text{ﺎﻣ} \\
\text{ﻥﺁﺯ} \\
\text{ﭙ} \\
\text{ﻪﻛﺶﻴ} \\
\text{ﭙ} \\
\text{ﺪﻨﻨﻛﺮ} \\
\text{ﭙ} \\
\text{ﻪﻧﺎﻤﻴ} \\
\text{ء} \\
\text{ﻪﻛﺰﻴﺧﺮﺑﺎﻣ} \\
\text{ﭗ} \\
\text{ﻢﻴﻨﻛﺮ} \\
\text{ﭗ} \\
\text{ﻰﻣﺯ} \\
\text{ﻪﻧﺎﻤﻴ} \\
\text{ء} \\
\text{ﻪﻛ} \\
\text{س} \\
\text{ﯼ} \\
\text{ر} \\
\text{십시오} \\
\text{دا} \\
\text{ز} \\
\text{밍} \\
\text{خارابات} \\
\text{ديوانه} \\
\text{ما} \\
\text{آم سحرى} \\
\text{دنا} \\
\text{زيمخانه} \\
\text{ما} \\
\text{بر} \\
\text{خير} \\
\text{كه} \\
\text{بر} \\
\text{كينم} \\
\text{پيماهه} \\
\text{ما} \\
\text{مزي} \\
\text{ناد} \\
\text{١٢٣٧} \\
\text{٢٠١١}
\]

My literal translation from the Persian of Omar Khayyām:

‘One morning there came a voice from our wine house,  
Come on, you wine house friends, you crazy ones of us  
Arise, and let us fill up another cup of wine,  
Before the moment that destiny will fill our cup.’

And here is what Āḥmad Rāmī in his Arabic translation made of it:

\[
\text{نادي من الحان: غفاة البشر} \\
\text{تفقم كاس العمر كف القدر} \\
\text{سمعت صوتا هائفا في السحر} \\
\text{هيا املأوا كاس الطليه قبل ان}
\]
And in my literal translation of Aḥmad Rāmī’s Arabic translation:

‘I heard a voice calling, in the early morning,
That called from the wine house: you slumbering people,
Come on, fill the brilliant cup, before
The hand of destiny makes the cup of life overflow.’

Edward FitzGerald, in his first version (of 1859) of the quatrains, makes two quatrains out of this one opening quatrain (his Nos. 1-2), but the idea of life’s transience is less evident in his second, reworked version (of 1868) of this quatrain. From Aḥmad Rāmī’s translation of the opening quatrain it is evident that he has not let himself be influenced by FitzGerald, but that he has faithfully followed the Persian text, although we do not know exactly which edition or version of the quatrains he used.

Let us now see how Umm Kulthūm sung this quatrain, and two others. For that purpose, I analyse some 6:25 minutes of Umm Kulthūm’s rendering of three of Khayyām’s quatrains. I took these from: ‘Oum Koulthoum, Roba’eyat El Khayam. Music by M. Riad El Sonbaty’, which is a CD (EAN 5425019290016), in a licensed edition by Platinum Records and Movies, AMD Classics, Brussels 2006 (later dates are sometimes given and the CD is available in internet shops) containing 36:58 minutes of sound in all. The date of the original recording is not indicated. The songbook (pp. 217-218) gives the text of the quatrains as sung and puts them together as one collection. I purchased the CD in Paris in October 2008 during the the Umm Kulthūm exhibition ‘Oum Kalsoum, la quatrième pyramide’ in the Institut du Monde Arabe.

The 6:25 minutes which I have selected I have divided into six parts:

1. 0:00-2:17 Musical prelude
2. 2:17-3:24 Quatrain 1
3. 3:24-3:52 Musical interlude
4. 3:52-4:45 Quatrain 2
5. 4:45-5:12 Musical interlude
6. 5:12-6:25 Quatrain 3.

In her performance Umm Kulthūm does not exactly follow the printed version of the Arabic translation by Aḥmad Rāmī. The small differences which can be observed between the published translation and the performance may be based on personal preferences of Umm Kulthūm or re-workings by Aḥmad Rāmī, but we do not know. These differences occur in the printed songbooks of Umm Kulthūm as well. The text of the
opening quatrain in Umm Kulthūm’s performance runs as follows (songbook, p. 217):

Umm Kulthūm’s rendition, the four lines of the original of Aḥmad Rāmī’s translation are produced in the sequence: 1-1-2-1-1-2-3-3-4.

With Umm Kulthūm’s performance of the second quatrain is somewhat similar, but this second quatrain in the songbook and on the CD cannot be found in the editions of Aḥmad Rāmī’s translation of Khayyām’s quatrains, and in a moment I will try to say why this is. The Arabic text comes from the songbook (p. 217):
Lā tashghal al-bāl bi-māḏī z-zamān
Wa-lā bi-āṭī l-aysh qabl al-awān.
Wa-ghnam min al-hāḏirī ladhdhātahū
Fa-laysa fī ṭab’ il-layāli l-amān.

And in my translation:

‘Be not worried over the passing of time
Nor about the future of life before it is time.
And take from the present its delicacies
Because in the nature of the nights lies no safety.’

Umm Kulthūm sings this second quatrain as follows:

Lā tashghal il-bāl bi-māḏī z-zamān
Lā tashghal il-bāl bi-māḏī z-zamān
Lā tashghal il-bāl bi-māḏī z-zamān
Wa-lā bi-āṭī l-aysh ... qabl al-awān
Wa-ghnam min al-hāḏirī ladhdhātīhi
Fa-laysa fī ṭab’ il-layāli l-amān.

In this second quatrain Umm Kulthūm’s sequence of the text according to the four lines of the original of Ḥmad Rāmī’s translation is different from what she did with the first quatrain: 1-1-1-2-3-4.

The third quatrain as performed by Umm Kulthūm could not be found either in the editions of Ḥmad Rāmī’s translation of Khayyam’s quatrains. The text is taken from the songbook (p. 217):

Ghadun bi-ẓahr il-ghayb wal-yawmu lī
Wa-kam yakhību ẓ-zannu bil-muqbili
Wa-lastu bil-ghāfil ḥattā arā
Ǧamāla dunyāya wa-lā aģtalī

And in my translation:

‘Tomorrow lies in hiding but today is mine
How much deceiving is thinking about the future.
And I am not negligent until I see
The beauty of my world, without looking at it.’
Umm Kulthūm’s actual performance of the third quatrain goes as follows:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Ghadun bi-ẓahr il-ghayb ... wal-yawmu li} \\
\text{Wa-kam yakhibu ẓ-zannu ... bil-muqbili} \\
\text{Wa-lastu bil-ghāfili ḥattā arā} \\
\text{Ǧamāla dunyāya wa-lā ağaṭalī}
\end{align*}
\]

Umm Kulthūm’s rendering of Aḥmad Rāmī’s translation is in the sequence: 1-1-1-2-1-1-2-3-4.

The performance by Umm Kulthūm of the quatrains is characterized by a repetition of the beginning line(s), which she also does in her performance of Qaṣīdas, odes, for that matter. With this technique she creates more substance of text, as a quatrain is actually a very short entity. It is precisely its shortness which makes the quatrain an excellent vehicle for epigrammic literature, and that is an important reason of the genre’s popularity. Umm Kulthūm, however, does not exploit that particular feature but she prefers to use the quatrain text for a longer-drawn songline. She substitutes succinctness by repetition. While doing so she creates tense moments in the first half of the song – as if she is struggling uphill – whereas in the second half she can release this tension, going downhill, coming home, and it works. That release is always followed by an enormous applause of the audience, who rejoice in the singer’s achievement.

As we have seen, ʿOmar Khayyām has, from 1949 onwards, been immensely popular in Egypt but only through the performances by Umm Kulthūm of Aḥmad Rāmī’s translations, set on music by Riyāḍ as-Sunbāṭī. In this, Aḥmad Rāmī’s translation of the quatrains has enjoyed a fate which was different from that of any other of the Arabic translations. However, Aḥmad Rāmī’s Arabic translation of the quatrains was used by Umm Kulthūm in a way of her own. She may have omitted the references to wine drinking from the first quatrain out of decency or prudishness. In the Persian mystical context wine is well-known as a metaphor and being drunk is understood as the state of self-abandonment of the mystic to the divine being. This is still very much the case in Iran where everybody knows that the wine poetry of the Imam Khomeini (to name but one recent example) does not celebrate real wine, the drinking of which is explicitly forbidden in the Qurʾān (5:90-91), but that it refers to the intoxication of the mystic by his divine
beloved, and in classical Arabic mystical poetry this is also the case. Whether the more mundane or popular audiences of Umm Kulthūm would also understand intoxication as a mystical state is not so evident. However, as an explanation for the differences between Aḥmad Rāmī’s printed translation and his version in the Umm Kulthūm songbook this is not entirely satisfactory. The songbook does mention the kaʾs al-ṭalāʾ, ‘the brilliant cup’, which was left out of Ahmad Rāmī’s third line of the first quatrain, in other contexts, e.g. in the song Sulūw Kuʿūs al-Ṭalāʾ, ‘the solace of the brilliant cups’, in a poem (not a wine poem, though) by one of Egypt’s greatest poets of the early twentieth century, Aḥmad Shawqī (d. 1932), several of whose poems were sung by Umm Kulthūm as well (songbook, pp. 216-217).

Umm Kulthūm sang quatrains which were said to be by Khayyām but which cannot be found in Aḥmad Rāmī’s translation (Nos. 2 and 3 of the above sample). Either Aḥmad Rāmī translated more quatrains than were eventually published, or he provided Khayyām-style quatrains of his own making. About this we have no further information, but we can speculate. The constitution of the corpus of Persian quatrains of Khayyām is a difficult enough matter, and it is not very useful to search for Persian quatrains of a content similar to these mystery quatrains sung by Umm Kulthūm. Anyway, a search through Nicolas’ edition did not yield result. For an accomplished poet such as Aḥmad Rāmī it cannot have been very difficult to catch the atmosphere of Khayyām’s poetry and write quatrains of his own manufacture in the spirit of Khayyām, and no doubt at the request of his leading lady whom he revered.

The fact that Umm Kulthūm sang some of the quatrains differently from the wording in the published texts may have wider implications. It would be interesting to compare more of her song texts, also texts by other poets, and to see in which form they have actually been performed, and thereby have become famous, as they were written by their poets or as they were sung by Umm Kulthūm. The ambition to create both simplification and beautification may have played a role, and it would be interesting to find out whether this reworking of the text was done by Umm Kulthūm herself, who, if that is indeed the case, may have thought that she, being the diva who she was, had the fullest right to do.

Bibliography

1. Editions and translations of Khayyām’s quatrains:

* Contains the Arabic translations of the quatrains by Ḥāmid al-Ṣāfī al-Naḡafī and Ḥāmid Rāmī. Also contains FitzGerald's translation of 1868. In Egypt Ḥāmid Rāmī’s translation has remained in print in editions of Dār al-Shurūq, one of Cairo’s more prominent publishing houses. Leiden University library possesses a copy of the 1931 edition of Ḥāmid Rāmī’s translation (class-mark 850 F 30).


The rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam done into English by Edward FitzGerald. Introduction by Laurence Housman. London and Glasgow (Collins Clear Type Press) n.d. (1930’s?)
* Contains the translations of and introductions to the quatrains by Edward FitzGerald of both 1859 and 1868, and the volume also contains FitzGerald’s translation of Jami’s Salámán and Absāl.

De ware zin heeft niemand nog verstaan. Kwatrijnen van Omar Khayyām en andere Perzische dichters. In het Perzisch met een Nederlandse vertaling, toelichting en nawoord door J.T.P. de Bruijn. Amsterdam (Uitgeverij Bulaaq) 2009

2. Other sources:

* Facsimile edition of a manuscript dated 1247/1831, with introduction, index and notes. When space in an anthology is an indicator of popularity Sa’dī is by far the most important poet (afṣāḥ al-mutakallimīn, he is called, ‘the most eloquent of orators’, pp. 275-293). Ḥāfīz lags far behind with only four pages (pp. 271-275) and Omar Khayyām has a mere two pages (pp. 138-140) in the Ātashkada.

* The wine that so pervades the quatrains has here been promoted to the title of the book. The author projects Khayyām’s greatness back into history. In addition he treats Khayyām the poet and Khayyām the philosopher and mathematician as one person, which is far from historical. All this shows how great a person Khayyām has become in the past century and a half.


*R* A study on Umm Kulthūm’s political activism and the development of the Egyptian and Arab myth that she became.

Raǧāʾ al-Naqqāš, *Lughz Umm Kulthum*. Cairo (Aṭlas) 2004

* ‘The enigma of Umm Kulthūm’. The memoires of a young companion of Umm Kulthūm on the singer’s life and times, and the men that lived around her.


*A* A selection of the best known pieces of Rāmī’s poetry, with a preface by Tawḥīd Rāmī, dated April 2000, and a short biographical notice about Rāmī’s early life by Ṣāliḥ Ġawdat, dated 1973. Several songs of Umm Kulthūm’s repertoire can be found in this collection.


* An encyclopaedic work on Umm Kulthūm (with a CD containing historical recordings), which also contains a comprehensive songbook of the singer. Therefore I refer to this works as ‘songbook’. The fifteen quatrains of Khayyām as sung by Umm Kulthūm are found on pp. 217-218. Aḥmad Rāmī is mentioned there as the song writer.


* A compilatory work containing a large number of memories of Umm Kulthūm mostly written by her contemporaries and the generation after. The ‘love story’ between Aḥmad Rāmī and Umm Kulthūm is told by Ramaḍān himself (pp. 43-47).